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ABSTRACT

Since attitudes of medical professionals may influence the health care delivered to elderly people and there is an increasing proportion of older people in society, it would seem appropriate to assess the attitudes toward older adults held by health care providers. This study examined attitudes toward older adults held by physical therapy students, and compared them with attitudes of 232 senior medical students at the same institution who participated in an earlier study using the same instrument. It was hypothesized that because physical therapy students are more likely to have personal contact with older adults in their clinical training than physicians do, they would have more positive attitudes toward older people than do medical students. The Kogan Attitudes Toward Older People Scale was administered to 47 junior and senior physical therapy students. The results of the study indicated that the physical therapy students had relatively positive attitudes toward older people as measured by this scale. Their mean raw score on the Kogan scale was 104.6 with a standard deviation of 16.79; in contrast, the senior medical students' mean score was 99.9, with a standard deviation of 16.79. A t-test revealed no statistically significant difference between the two groups, thus rejecting the study hypothesis. Both groups demonstrated more positive attitudes than did comparable samples of undergraduate, graduate, and medical students previously reported in the literature. (Author/NB)

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Attitudes Towards Older Adults: A Comparison Of Physical Therapy and Medical Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine attitudes towards older adults of physical therapy students, and to compare them with results of a previous study of 232 senior medical students at the same institution. The Kogan Attitudes Toward Older People Scale (OP) was admisistered to 47 junior and senior physical therapy students at a state supported Midwestern medical center. The results of this study indicated that the physical therapy students had relatively positive attitudes towards old people as mesured by the Kogan OP scale. In comparison with the attitudes of medical students from a previous study, a t-test revealed no statistically significant difference between the two groups. Both groups demonstrated more positive attitudes than comparable samples of undergraduate, graduate, and medical students previously reported in literature.

An ancient Greek physician once stated, "It is the function of medicine to help people die as late as possible (Fletcher, 1984). Since attitudes of medical professionals may influence the health care delivered to elderly people, and there is an increasing proportion of older people in our society, it would seem to be appropriate to assess the attitudes toward the older adults held by health care providers.

Research literature that evaluates the attitudes of medical students towards older adults is extensive (Adelman & Albert, 1987; Green, Keith & Paulson, 1983; Powell, Thorson, Kara & Uhl, 1990; Spence & Feigenbaum, 1968; Tarbox, Connors & Faillace, 1987; Thorson & Perkins, 1981). Powell et al. (1990) administered the Kogan (1961) Old People Scale (OP) to 277 incoming freshman medical students at a private midwestern university in 1981, 1982, and 1983. The OP scale was administered again to 232 of these same medical students as graduating seniors in 1984, 1985, 1986. The freshman OP mean score of 102.56 was more positive (the lower the score, the more positive the attitude) than the mean score of 115 reported by Perrotta, Perkins, Schimpfhauser & Calkins (1981) for 127 freshman medical students at an eastern state university in 1979. Green et al. (1983) examined the relationship between the attitudes of 148 third year medical students and their willingness to work with older patients. The study demonstrated that the medical students had a "generally positive" view of the older patients in terms of stereotypes, family and professional contacts, and the rewards of interaction with them. Holtzman, Beck, Hodgetts, Coggan & Ryan (1977) found that medical students had relatively positive attitudes towards older people. The types of attitude survey instruments used by Holtzman et al. (1977) and Green et al. (1983) were not specifically mentioned in these studies, and thus can not be directly compared to the studies using the Kogan OP scale. A study by Belgrave, Lavin, Breslan & Haug (1982) showed that all medical students adhered to negative stereotypes of elderly people as determined by the Palmore's Facts On Aging Quiz.

Adelman and Albert (1987) conducted an extensive critical review of the literature that evaluated medical students' attitudes towards older people. They reported that the literature related to student attitudes is extensive, but that the literature is difficult to compare due to the diversity of study methods and attitudinal instruments used. Green et al. (1983) also noted that the disparity of findings may be attributed more to variations in methodology than to actual group differences.

In contrast, research literature that evaluates physical therapy students' attitudes towards older people is scarce. Green (1981) investigated physical therapists and their attitudes toward elderly people involving age bias in treatment planning and goal setting. Kvitek, Shaver & Blood (1986) administered three questionnaires (Kogan's OP scale, Palmore's Facts on Aging Quiz, and Scale for Aggressiveness in Goal Setting) to 127 physical therapists from 14 hospitals and rehabilitation facilities in the San Francisco Bay area. These questionnaires assessed therapists' attitudes toward aging and the aged, knowledge of aging, and goal-setting aggressiveness, respectively. All physical therapists were given the same hypothetical patient description, but half received a patient aged 28 and the other half received a patient aged 78 years. Physical therapists responding to the hypothetical old patient description were significantly less aggressive in setting their treatment goals than those responding to the hypothetical young patient description. Therapists who had a more positive attitudes toward aging responded to the older hypothetical patient more aggressively and they set more aggressive treatment goals for that older patient.

Very few comparative studies have used the same attitude survey instruments and methods to assess different groups of health care profession students. Wolk and Wolk (1971) investigated professional health care workers and students in the areas of social work, psychology, and nursing. Geiger (1978) performed a comparative analysis

of social work, law, and medical student perceptions towards older adults. Holtzman, Beck & Ettinger (1987) assessed cognitive knowledge and attitudes toward the aged, of dental and medical students. In all three studies, the subjects who chose to work with older adults demonstrated more positive attitudes towards them. Within this group, the older health professionals manifested more positive attitudes towards older adults than the younger workers or students. Generally speaking, positive student experiences with older people fostered the development of more positive attitudes.

The purpose of this study was to determine attitudes towards older adults of physical therapy students, and to compare the results with a previous study of senior level medical students. The hypothesis formulated was that attitudes of physical therapy students towards older adults would be more positive than those of medical students in a previous study that was conducted at the same institution and using the same instrument (Kogan's OP scale). It was believed that because physical therapy students are more likely to have personal contact with older adults in their clinical training than physicians do, that they would have more positive attitudes toward older people.

METHODS

The Kogan Attitudes Toward Old People Scale (OP) is a 34 item Likert scale containing 17 positively and negatively matched pairs of statements about older people with which subjects are asked to agree or disagree (Kogan, 1961). This scale was developed to assess attitudes toward older people, and has been used with undergraduate and graduate students as well as medical students. The Kogan OP Scale item scores range form 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) with a neutral score of four not appearing on the scale, but being assigned only in the case of an unanswered item. A lower item score (below 4.0) indicates a relatively more positive attitude toward old people, and a higher score (above 4.0) indicates a relatively

more negative attitude. The OP has 17 scale items that are each phrased positively and again as negative statements, and the items are sorted so they do not fall together. Kogan's scoring system involves reversing the positive item scores before adding up each subject's total score. The lower a subject's total score is, the more positive are his/her attitudes toward old people.

In the present study, Kogan's scale was administered to 28 junior and 19 senior physical therapy students at a state supported midwestern university medical center. Subjects ranged in age from 21 to 37 years, with a mean age of 24.4 years. There were a total of 15 male and 32 female students participating in the study. In contrast, 232 senior medical students in Powell et al. (1990) study included 181 males and 51 females with a mean age of 26.7 years. The attitudinal survey results in the present study were compared to that of the senior medical students. This was done to assure a more similar clinical experience between the two groups, which in each case included exposure to a geriatric population.

DATA ANALYSIS

A *t*-test was performed to determine any significant difference between the physical therapy and medical students' OP scores.

RESULTS

A total of 47 surveys were distributed to the physical therapy students, and 47 surveys were returned for a 100% return rate. Their mean raw score on the Kogan OP scale was 104.6 (range 72-127), with a standard deviation of 11.11 (See Table 1). In contrast, the senior medical students' mean score was 99.9, with a standard deviation of 16.79. A *t*-test indicated there was no significant difference in attitude scores between groups (t=1.818, of 277, N.S.), thus rejecting our hypothesis.

DISCUSSION

It is interesting to note the relatively more positive attitudes towards the elderly of physical therapy students (M=104.6, SD=11.11) in comparison to three comparable samples by Kogan in 1961: 168 undergraduates at an eastern university (M=119.0, SD=21.94): an initial sample of undergraduate students at a northeastern university (M=118.9, SD=20.70): and a second sample at the same northeastern university of 186 undergraduates (M=111.6, SD=22.75) (See Table 1).

(Insert Table 1 About Here)

The physical therapy student scores were also more positive than a sample of 127 freshman medical students at an eastern medical school (M=115). Perrotta, Perkins, Schimpfhauser & Calkins (1981). The scores in the present sample were also more positive than a sample of 212 graduate and undergraduate students at a southern university (M=108.5, SD=21.75) reported by Thorson and Perkins in 1981.

Studies have suggested that many physicians, dentists, nurses, and other health professionals have the same negative attitudes toward older people as the general population. Health profession students' attitudes toward elders are important because they may affect future delivery of health care to older people. Negative attitudes towards older people may diminish the quality of future health care delivered to this population. Positive attitudes toward older people need to be facilitated among health profession students to ensure optimal health care services for the aging population in our country. The type of student contact with older patients is of primary importance in facilitating positive attitudes, and the quality of exposure to geriatric patients is probably more important than the number of interactions. (Tarbox et al., 1987). Proposed solutions to ageist stereotypes within medical students include ensuring contact with well elderly patients, as well as having positive physician role models as instructors (Tarbox et al., 1987).

The study of long term effects of curriculum interventions on health professions students may help determine student receptivity to work with older people. More research should be conducted to determine optimal exposure in the curriculum to older patients to ensure positive long term attitudes of students in their careers.

The need to change curriculum of physical therapy and physical therapy assistant programs to improve student preparation for working with older adults in their clinical affiliations and future careers has been demonstrated by Nieland, Farina, and Edwards (1990). This national survey of existing physical therapy and physical therapy assistant programs' curricula by the American Physical Therapy Association Department of Accreditation demonstrated a variety of areas for improvement. These areas for curriculum changes included increased number of courses on geriatrics, increased emphasis on specialization in geriatrics by students and faculty, and increased availability of funding for clinical research on geriatrics. The increasing percentage of Americans over age 65 that physical therapists are exposed to indicates a growing need for practicing therapists to obtain advanced training in geriatrics. This training could take the form of a continuing education seminar, work internship, or formal college courses in gerontology. The American Geriatric Society (1991) has developed curriculum guidelines on the care of the elderly patient for internal medicine residency training programs. Perhaps this can serve as a model for other health care professionals.

SUMMARY

Despite the fact that physical therapists spend more time with patients and are more likely to work with older patients, the physical therapy students in this study did not significantly differ from a comparable group of medical students. Physical therapy students did, however, have more positive attitudes toward older people than other undergraduate, graduate, and medical students studied in 1979.

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